THOMAS ANBUREY'S OBSERVATIONS ON NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS.

BY HERBERT FRIEDMANN.[1]

ONE of the rarest and least known of the early books of travel in North America is the "Travels through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters," by an Officer, published in London in two volumes in 1789. The officer in question was Thomas Anburey, who served in the British Army in America during the Revolutionary War under the Earl of Harrington, "colonel of the twenty ninth regiment of foot." This work is apparently unknown to most ornithologists as it does not appear in any of the ornithological bibliographies or indices to literature. It was brought to my attention by Mr. Austin H. Clark.

Among a great variety of topics discussed in the letters are a number of readily identifiable birds, and some of these accounts are surprisingly full. Because of their historical as well as naturalistic interest, they are here quoted verbatim, and are arranged in chronological order, according to the dates of the individual letters.

In letter number 8 (written at Quebec, November 4, 1776 (volume 1, page 83) he writes that in the woods of that part of Canada " * * * ; we found likewise vast quantities of partridges, much larger than ours, which the Canadians call pheasants; there are two sorts of them, the spruce and the pine: the meat of the former is very delicious, to those who are fond of the flavor of the spruce."

Letter 26 (volume 1, pp. 275–277) written at Camp at River Bouquet on Lake Champlain, June 23, 1777, contains some interesting notes on the Passenger Pigeon. For completeness sake I have included it here, although it has been quoted in part by A. H. Wright (Auk, 1911, p. 364) who seems to be the only ornithologist to have known of Anburey's book.

"There are at this season of the year prodigious flights of pigeons crossing the lake, of a most beautiful plumage, and in astonishing quantities.

"These are most excellent eating, and that you may form some idea as to their number, at one of our encampments, the men for

[1] Published by Permission of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

one day wholly subsisted on them; fatigued with their flight in crossing the lake, they alight upon the first branch they can reach to, many are so weary as to drop in the water, and are easily caught; those that alight upon a bough being unable to fly again, the soldiers knock down with long poles.

"During the flights of these pigeons, which cross this lake into Canada, and are continually flying about in large flocks, the Canadians find great amusement in shooting them, which they do after a very singular manner: in the day time they go into the woods, and make ladders by the side of the tall pines, which the pigeons roost on, and when it is dark they creep softly under and fire up this ladder, killing them in gerat abundance; they then strike a light, and firing a knot of the pitch pine, pick up those they have killed, and the wounded ones that are unable to fly. During the flights of these pigeons, which generally last three weeks or a month, the lower sort of Canadians mostly subsist on them.

"Now I am upon this subject, it reminds me of what *Monsieur Blondeaux* was continually telling me of, *le grand plaisir que j'aurai quand l'ete commencera en tuant les tourtes;* adding, at same time, with great pleasure, *amusement que le Canadien aime beaucoup.* However, as to the numbers he used always to join with this observation, I generally thought my good landlord was setting off his country to great advantage by dealing in the marvellous, and should have been impressed with that idea, had I not been by ocular demonstration convinced to the contrary."

In letter 54 (volume 2, pages 198–208) written at Mystic, in New England (Connecticut) May 10, 1778, he describes four birds, the Fire-bird (Scarlet Tanager?), the Hanging-bird (Baltimore Oriole), the Blue-bird, and the Humming-bird.

"The Fire-bird is somewhat larger than a sparrow, and its plumage is of a fine deep yellow, resembling a flame color, from whence it derives its name.

"The Hanging-bird is of about the same size, of a brilliant orange, with a few black feathers in the wing, which forms a pleasing contrast: It appears as if this bird was sensible what enemies men, as well as other animals, are to the young of the feathered creation, for they construct their nests upon the extremity of a large bough, not in the nature of other birds, but sus-

pended at a considerable distance from the bough, resembling a hornet's nest; on one side there is a hole where the birds enter. It is somewhat remarkable that these nests, though suspended near two feet and a half from the branch of the tree, and that only by five or six small cords which these birds make from the loose hemp that they pick up, they are never blown down by the high winds. I was present at the taking of one of these nests, and it was with great difficulty it could be disengaged from the branch, without destroying the whole nest. The young ones are the most tractable of the feathered tribe, and in the hands of those who would bestow time and pains, they might be instructed in a variety of little tricks and fancies.

"An officer, who was ill and confined to his room, being a great bird-fancier, had a nest with these young ones brought him, which he amused himself with, and finding them tractable, he fed them with flies, for which they would follow him all round the room: in a short time he had them in such command, that they would at his desire, retire to their nest, and come out again either singly, or all three together: one he had such sway over, that he would take it into the garden, and let it fly into a tree, and the instant he called it, the bird flew and perched on his shoulder.

"The Blue-bird is of the size, and nearly as numerous as the sparrow; there is nothing remarkable about this bird but its plumage, which is of the most beautiful mazarine, and when the rays of the Sun reflect on it, the color is greatly heightened.

"The Humming-birds are in great plenty here, but not near so numerous, as I am informed they are to the Southward.—This bird being not only beautiful, but having many peculiarities, and being the least of the feathered creation, not being much larger than an humble bee, you'll pardon my entering into a full detail of it.

"The plumage of the cock is beautiful in the extreme, varying into an infinity of colour; in one light it is of a lively green, in another a beautiful blue, and in another a fine golden color: in short, in every ray of light you can possibly turn it, you distinguish a different tint. This little creature subsists upon the juice of flowers, which it sucks up with a long bill; it is really diverting to see it putting its little bill into every flower in a circle; as soon as one is sucked, it flutters to the next; during the sucking the juice out

of the flowers it never settles on them, but flutters continually like bees, and moves its wings so quick they appear hardly visible, and during this fluttering make a humming noise. This bird is not very shy, but if you attempt to seize it, flies off with the swiftness of an arrow. You would hardly conceive how predominant the passion of envy is amongst these little creatures; if several of them met on the same bed of flowers, they attack each other with their bills. In their combats they would often fly into a room if a window is open, fight a little, and flutter away again; they not only possess the passion of envy, but anger; for if they meet with a flower that is withered, or that is withering, and contains no more juice, these little creatures, in a violent passion, pluck it off and throw it on the ground. I have seen in large gardens, where there has been many beds of flowers, the ground quite covered with the effects of their rage.

"The Humming-bird being so exceeding small, and very difficult to catch, I was greatly at a loss to procure one to stuff and add to the collection I am making for you; sensible that firing at it with shot would shatter the little creature to atoms, I knew not what method to devise to obtain one, therefore consulted the inhabitants, who informed me, they never caught them unless they flew into a room when the window was open; for a week and upwards I sat in expectation that that would happen, during which time I employed my thoughts as to some other mode, when it occurred to me, if I loaded a pistol with powder, and put some fine sand as a charge, I thought the great report would either stun them, or the grains of sand would beat them down: and after my patience was quite exhausted as to the other mode of catching them, I adopted my own, which I found succeeded to my wish; for seeing one alight upon a flower, I fired at it, and it fell with the report; as shortly after I had taken it up, it was near escaping; what makes me imagine it was only stunned was, that the grains of sand had not hurt even its feathers; but to ascertain the matter, I procured several only by putting powder in the pistol, which fully proved it was the report that had effect on them.

"It is looked upon as a great rarity indeed, if the nest of this little bird is found, and it is merely accidental, as they are only to be met with in swamps, when the trees are very thick of foliage.

Having procured the bird, I was anxious to obtain a nest, as I no doubt imagined that it was equally as curious as the bird itself, but well knowing any search that I could make would be in vain, I told several Negroes, who were cutting wood in a swamp, if they found a nest and shewed it me I would give them a dollar; accordingly, one morning a negro came and informed me he had found one; I went with him into the middle of a large swamp, and stopping just by where he had been cutting some wood, he says, 'Massa, Massa, dere is de nest,' which not being very easily discerned, he got a long pole and pointed to it, when even then I could not see it, perceiving nothing but moss; but taking away his pole hastily, he said, 'Massa, keep your eye dere, and you will see de old one'; and shortly after the old one came and settled on the nest, between the forks of a bough; I ascended the tree, and was then as much at a loss to find it till the negro pointed to it, and I saw the old one on the nest: upon my approach she flew off, and kept hovering and humming about my head. In the nest there were two eggs; I cut off the branch the nest was on, and descended the tree, but coming down the main stem, I had the misfortune to drop one of the eggs out of the nest, as I was obliged to bring the branch it was on in my mouth, and although the negro and myself searched for it near an hour, we could not find it; I cannot but say I was heartily vexed, as the eggs are the greatest curiosity: it is rather fortunate I have one left to send you, otherwise you would scarcely credit it, when I tell you, that although the bird, which, as I before mentioned, is not much larger than an humble bee, the eggs are nearly as large as a wren's.

"Upon an examination of the nest, I was not surprized at my discerning it with difficulty from the other moss that grew on the tree, for the outside has a coating of green moss, such as is commonly on old pales, enclosures, and old trees; the nest, as well as the bird, is the least of all others; that which I have taken is round, and the inside is of a brown and quite soft down, which seems to have been collected from the stems of the sumach, which are covered with a soft wool of this color, and the plant grows in great abundance here; the inner diameter of the nest is hardly a geometrical inch at the top, and the depth scarcely half an inch. I have taken peculiar care of it, as well as the nest of the Hanging-bird,

and shall send them by the first opportunity, and am sure you will join with me in the adoration of that Being, who has endowed these creatures with such natural instinct, to guard against the wiles of man and other enemies: but what creature is there either offensive, or inoffensive, but some of its species has fallen a victim to the rapacious hand of man."

In letter 56 (volume 2, pp. 227–228) written at Mystic, in New England, May 20, 1778, he describes the Whip-poor-will as follows:

"At this season of the year, every night you are surrounded with music, not the most harmonic, from frogs, bull-frogs, hooping-owls, and the *whipper will*, a bird so named by its nocturnal song, being a constant repetition of *whipper will;* it is also known by the name of the *Pope*, by reason of its making a noise resembling that word, when it alights upon a tree or fence. I have endeavoured several times to shoot one, but owing to its being dark, and their flying so exceedingly swift, I have never been able to kill. By the information I have gathered from the inhabitants, I find it is about the size of a cuckow, with a short beak, long and narrow wings, a large head, and mouth enormous, what is remarkable, it is not a bird of prey; under the throat there is a kind of skin which it can expand, and fill with air at pleasure, and that enables it to make the noise which resembles the word Pope. From this description, I conceive it to be a Musquito hawk, abundance of which are to be seen in the day time; I accordingly shot one; and found it exactly correspond to the description of the other, only I could not perceive that loose skin under its throat; I rather think that circumstance is imaginary, and am apt to conclude, that the Musquito hawk and whipper-will are the same bird."

In letter 58 (volume 2, pp. 276–277) written at Sherwood's Ferry, upon the Banks of the Delaware, December 10, 1778, he describes his pleasure at making the personal acquaintance of the " * * * Mocking-bird, which derives its name from imitating the note of every bird they hear; its plumage is very simple and not shewy, it is a Summer bird, very difficult to bring up, and has a very melodious voice, which, in my opinion, would far exceed the Bullfinch, if the same pains were taken with it, from its amazing readiness in catching every note it hears. This one I saw imitated a cock in such a manner, that you could hardly believe but that there was a

cock crowing in the room. The inhabitants say this bird is so very shy, that if any person discovers its nest, which is mostly built in bushes, and looks at its eggs, it will never return again to the nest. When a nest of young ones are taken, and put into a cage, they take great care to hang it where the mother cannot get at it, for if she can, she will feed them three or four days, and finding she cannot release them flies away, after which, the young ones shortly die, as in general they cannot eat what is given them? but the inhabitants attribute their death to the mother, who, they say, the last time she feeds them, contrives to give them poison, in order to release them from captivity.—If that really is the case, it shews how repugnant it is to the principles of nature, to confine any thing, and that she calls aloud to partake of the blessings of liberty, but at present it reminds me of my own situation, I must therefore drop the subject."

Finally in letter 69 (volume 2, page 434) written at Jones's Plantation, near Charlottesville, Virginia, December 12, 1779, he describes a, " . . . large ravenous kind of bird that feeds on carrion, nearly as big as an eagle, called a turkey-bustard, from having red gills, resembling those of a turkey, whence it derives its name. It seems to be a species of the kite, hovering on the wing like that bird, and being carniverous. The inhabitants kill them for the sake of their feet, which dissolved into an oil, is esteemed very salutary in the sciatica, old aches and pains."

U. S. National Museum,
Washington, D. C.